Libraries as an infrastructure for a sustainable public sphere in a digital age

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Abstract
This session will focus upon challenges to upholding a sustainable public sphere in a digital age and the potential of libraries to contribute to an infrastructure that might help us cope with these challenges. The workshop can be seen as a continuation of last year's workshop themed *Partnership with society: A social and cultural approach to iSchool research*
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1. Overview

Digitization changes the conditions for upholding a sustainable public sphere understood as a communicative space independent from the state, the market and the private sphere where citizens can congregate, where undistorted deliberation on public matters can take place and a public opinion can be formed. Habermas argues that a self-regulating media, not dependent upon the state and not governed by short-term commercial interests, are vital for the public sphere to function (Habermas, 2006). We do however, know that digitization has affected the role of traditional media fundamentally. Internet and social media seem to displace traditional media. Taking Norway as an example, the proportion of people reading at least one newspaper daily has dropped from almost 80 per cent in 2000 to 42 percent in 2015. Traditional media has had the double function of being a channel through which government can communicate its policies to the public simultaneously as they have been arenas where the public critically can scrutinize those very policies. What is the effect when traditional media are being displaced by the Internet and social media? Does it open up possibilities for new and extended forms of deliberation based on crowdsourcing (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2013; Aitamurto & Landemore. 2015; Landemore, 2015; Landemore, 2013; Landemore, 2015), or will it lead to fragmentation (Dahlgren, 2006) and echo chambers where people are exposed to values and ideas they cherish, not ideas that challenge them (Sunstein, 2001)?

The state authorities have a responsibility for facilitating the conditions for an "open and enlightened public discourse". (Norwegian constitution, § 100). This 'infrastructure requirement' (Ministry of Justice and the Police, 1999) affirms the duty of the state to support the development of cultural institutions as a means of promoting freedom of expression. In the US, cultural institutions such as libraries are not constitutionally mandated, but they are supported by federal and state legislation, and in many cases they are sustained locally. In 2010 in Japan, the government invested approximately 390 million U.S. dollars to give public libraries the ability to renew their facilities and services. Many public libraries developed systems to digitize their own documents, and have been transforming their organizations in order to contribute to local and online Japanese communities. Even in China, the public sphere is becoming broader by way of grassroots activism, and this means the citizens' need of public libraries is also becoming more significant. The legitimacy of the archive, library, and museum (ALM) institutions in general and (public) libraries in particular is to a large extent rooted in their being important infrastructural elements for the public sphere: Partly, changes in other parts of the public sphere's infrastructure referred to above, might affect the role of libraries. Can, for example, libraries compensate for the weakening of the combined role of traditional media of mediating between authorities and the public and being arenas for critical discourse (Johansson, 2001)? Other questions are related to the effects of digitization on libraries as such: Does, for example, increased use of the Internet and social media lead to the same displacement effect for libraries as arenas underpinning the public sphere as we have seen for newspapers and broadcast media? Koizumi and

Widdersheim (2015) and Widdersheim (2015) point at three dimensions or discourses related to libraries as public sphere institutions: Discourses related to the content of the library and the public services to be offered, e.g. collection development; discourses related to legitimating the library; and finally, discourses related to social issues external to the library. If these discourses are invaded by discourses belonging to the private sphere or the market, the result might be distortion. What are the effects in this respect of digitization on the role of libraries as public sphere institutions, e.g. the outsourcing of collection development to commercial firms, which is linked to the introduction of e-books? Another group of issues is related to how libraries should respond to and balance between different challenges to upholding a public sphere, e.g. the challenge of access to information and knowledge citizens need to take informed decisions, developing civic skills needed for being able to participate in a digital age and access to arenas for debate and discourse. In addition, can libraries as institutions rooted simultaneously in their (physical) communities and the digital world contribute in promoting deliberative communication on a mass scale in the sense Aitamurtin & Landemore (2013) describe?

2. Purpose and intended audience

The session aims at bringing together researchers interested in working on issues combining theories on the public sphere with information science, focusing upon the practical challenges related to a functioning public sphere and a vital democracy which digitization creates.

3. Goals or outcomes

The session will contribute in making the iSchools even more relevant with relation to a major concern in today's societies: Ways and means to meet the challenge of a disintegrating public sphere, bridging the gap between those who govern and those who are governed and counter political and social indifference.

4. The format of the session

The purpose of this SIE is to exchange research ideas related to the public sphere and public libraries, especially regarding the increasingly digital nature of public library media. A distinguishing characteristic of an SIE is its incorporation of some activity for participants. The conference CFP also suggests that an SIE should lead to some tangible or intellectual output, something that participants take away from the session. As session planners, we must identify what participants will know or be able to do following the session, and we must also design how that outcome will be achieved.

For this session, we propose that participants create research plans tailored to their interests. These plans are the session's take-away.   Participants will develop these plans in groups during the session. Participants will then briefly present their plans for constructive feedback.

An SIE is a 90-minute session. We therefore propose the following session outline:

Segment One: Introduction
15 minutes
Session organizers briefly present a general background and orientation for approaching questions related to the public sphere and public libraries, with an emphasis on digital media. Speakers define key concepts and identify general research problems. In this introductory segment, speakers are careful not to bias participants' thinking toward or against any particular research approach. Instead, speakers stimulate participants' thinking.

Segment Two: Group Activity
30 minutes
Participants break into groups in order to develop their own research plans according to their background and interests. All plans should at least include the following:
-A research problem
-A research question
-A methodological approach, including data collection and analysis techniques
-Expected results—what the researchers hope to be able to say at the end of their project
-Possible research challenges

Segment Three: Group Presentations
30 minutes

Participant groups each present their plans and offer constructive feedback to one another, especially regarding potential research challenges. The objective of this part of the session is to ensure that participants each have a plan that could actually be carried out.

Segment Four: Conclusion
15 minutes
Session organizers share their own research plans, experiences, and field questions about them. All the organizers are in some way already engaged in this research area, so these concluding remarks could offer commentary on the past, present, and future of this research topic. This part of the session could be split up into several brief 5- or 10-minute talks, depending on how organizers wish to discuss their current or future research projects.

5. Relevance to the conference

The session will give input to develop iSchool curricula that is relevant for today's democratic challenges. Thus, the session provides an opportunity to create an iSchool brand that is even more than today linked to social and cultural perspectives and to social challenges related to information technology.

6. Preferred number of participants

15 – 20 participants

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